Who Can Still Afford to do Digital Activism? Exploring the material conditions of online mobilisation

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Democracy in Flux

Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

Who Can Still Afford to do Digital Activism?

Exploring the material conditions of online mobilisation

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1 INTRODUCTION

As digital activism is now considered a widespread form of activism, studies about its impact and tactics have expanded. Whilst majority of current research into this phenomenon (Treré, 2018; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Postill, 2012) have tended to analyse the impact of digital technologies on *action* and *activism* (its nature and impact), this study adopts a different perspective as it will be exploring the role of *organisations* and *organisational structures*, focusing on internal processes and functioning of digital campaigning. Based on ethnographic observation and face-to-face interviews with members of online campaigning organisations, the paper aims to present an updated study of digital organising and reflect on the initial findings about the role of women in the *digital activist labour*.

2 RECOGNISING THE DIGITAL ACTIVISM LABOUR

Originally based on the so called 'MoveOn model', built around the structure of the famous US online campaigning organisation, digital first campaigning has been often depicted as a form of '*organising without organisations'* (Karpf, 2012). In this view, digital activism seems to appear as an immaterial phenomenon that happens almost spontaneously as a result of self-organising processes, facilitated by the use of the Internet and amplified through social media.
Since the times of MoveOn, digital campaigning organisations have instead become increasingly professionalised, as their role of intermediaries between activists and institutional political actors is increasingly needed. As one member of staff from an online campaigning organisation once said to me: "*the time when one could share a petition on social media and attract huge attention have since long go. We need to accept the fact that we might never have a campaign that gets viral. We need to work much harder and for less visibility*.". What this quote exemplifies is the awareness from those who operate within these organisations that times have shifted, as the online space has become more crowded, and more work and better infrastructures are needed in order to develop new tactics and campaigns strategies that can mobilise people and have impact.

In her recent book studying a workers' rights movement in North Carolina, Jen Schradie (2019) interestingly presents the finding that those groups who are better-resourced, have developed solid infrastructures, hierarchy of decision making, clear division of labour, are simply the most effective and those who benefit the most from the use digital tools for activism. The reasons to forward what Schradie calls the '*digital activist bureaucracy'* are many, including to bring the attention back to the material conditions of work and precarity, hierarchy and exclusion that many who work in this field have to face. For the purpose of the Weizenbaum conference I will focus on one key aspect, which is the conditions of women within the structures of digital labour, as this is very much a neglected area also for social movement research more broadly (Batliwala and Friedman, 2014).

3 FEMINISM AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM: A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

Whilst some scholars (Tarrow 2011) initially identified feminist principles and values as being at the core of new digital social movements, recently more critical perspectives on the current evolution of feminism in the digital space are emerging (Jouët, 2018; Fotopolou, 2016; Baer, 2016; Boler et al 2014). Drawing on feminist studies of activism (Bhattacharjya et al. 2013) this paper argues that inequalities can be built and perpetrated within social movements themselves, even when women are participants and women rights campaigns are prioritised. Moreover, the argument that

this paper aims to bring forward is that these inequalities could possibly even be exacerbated in time of digital activism in at least two ways: 1) by introducing new forms of discriminations; 2) by creating an aggressive online environment against women.

On the first point, scholars of digital movements have for instance revealed discriminatory dynamics happening from within these movements, as women are relegated to forms of 'connective labor' (Boler et al 2014), which are gender specific forms of invisible labour in the area of social media and storytelling. These points deeply resonated in my interviews, as the women I spoke to all reflected on the male predominance in the Tech teams, and the difficulty of addressing the gender unbalance (in organisation that were otherwise predominantly made by women), as applications for tech roles were very rarely coming from women tech experts. One interviewee interestingly highlighted how members of the Tech team were not clarifying important tech functionalities or avoiding to explain the technology used for specific tactics, as in their own words those women not in the Tech team "*don't need to understand that."* in this way affirming a sort of *epistemic exclusion.* Aristea Fotopolou (2016) also highlighted how feminist organisations experience new forms of exclusion of access to the digital networks, based on skills, resources and age. These findings are confirmed in the research from Josiane Jouët (2018) carries out in France, which reflects on the changes that feminist online groups have witnessed regarding the biographies of the women involved and the style of leadership and organizing: "(…) *activists are mainly young, in their late twenty or thirties (..), belong to the middle or upper-low classes, and many have reached at least the first level of higher education"* (Jouët, 2018). The young women that Jouët interviewed were fully aware of the need to develop very good communication and digital skills, also in order to avoid depending on male tech-experts. As a consequence of these shifts in profiles, interests and knowledge of these young women activists, the study reveals how new professional figures and ways of working have emerged in this area. These new 'leaders' in fact often belong to the media sphere and are communication and digital experts.

On the second point, it emerged from my research that whilst on one hand women are enabled by online activism to take action without *"having to take the streets",* still online activism is not protecting them from attacks and violence. Scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser has for instance recently highlighted (2018) how at the same time when girls are encouraged to play a central role in the new digital world, and as forms of *hashtag* feminism seem to have been so successful, there is an increase in online misogynistic movements which undermine positive change from happening. Her analysis points to the perverse effect of the '*economy of visibility'*, as women activists are keen to be visible and develop strategies to maximise their exposure (Jouët, 2018), they (perhaps) inadvertently end up feeding the same algorithmic logic that is giving visibility to the increased misogynism online.

The implications of digital forms of activism on feminist movements are multiple and complex to explore. Even those authors (Baer, 2016 and others) who recognise the great potential that digital platforms have for disseminating feminist ideas transnationally, do in fact raise important questions regarding how digital activism has been impacting feminist protest culture and the advancement of feminist values in deeper ways. This paper aims to provide an initial contribution in this area and open a debate, which is currently missing within the wider digital activism scholarship.

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